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SUBJECT: Ambassador Harty learns France will produce e passport in April

Ref: A) Paris 1472 B) Paris 964 C) Paris 565

1. Summary: Assistant Secretary Maura Harty, accompanied by Paris Deputy Chief of Mission Karl Hofmann and Consul General Donald E. Wells met on March 10 with Claude Gueant, the Cabinet Director at the Ministry of Interior (MoI) to discuss the French government's progress in developing an electronic passport compliant with U.S. Government (USG) regulations. Gueant informed Ambassador Harty that the e-passport production impasse (Ref A) ended on March 3, 2006 when the decision was made to give the French government printing office the exclusive right to produce the e-passport. Gueant asserted that by June 2006, all passport applicants will be issued the new electronic passport that not only will comply with current USG regulations, but also with those requirements coming into effect on 26 October, 2006. He also offered to help expedite issuance of new passports to individuals with immediate travel plans to the U.S. Post remains cautiously optimistic as the measures taken in the consular section by Embassy Paris to manage the high non-immigrant visa demand are having a positive effect on the wait-time for an appointment. End Summary.

2. On March 10, Bureau of Consular Affairs Assistant Secretary Maura Harty met with Claude Gueant, Cabinet

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Director at the MoI, to discuss the latest developments in the French plans to issue an electronic passport. Ambassador Harty reiterated that Embassy Paris faces unprecedented demand for non-immigrant visas as a result of the French government's delay in production of an electronic passport and that the Embassy is doing everything in its power to assist French nationals in traveling to the U.S. Ambassador Harty asked Gueant to brief her on progress toward producing an electronic passport, which when realized will greatly alleviate the present French demand for U.S. non-immigrant visas.

3. After providing background information on the delay in producing an electronic passport, Gueant informed the Assistant Secretary that by June 2006, all new French passports will comply with both current and up-coming USG requirements for visa free entry to the U.S. Gueant stated that e-passport production will begin on April 13. Production initially will focus on applicants in a limited region near Paris and then will gradually expand to include applicants across the entire country by June.

4. Gueant acknowledged that this rollout schedule, as envisioned by the French Government Printing Office, may be a bit ambitious, nevertheless, he was optimistic that the delay in the conversion to an electronic passport would soon be over. When asked by the DCM when the Embassy could see the new e-passport, the Cabinet Director stated that he hoped exemplars would be available by the end of March. After the new passport passes inspections to conform not only with USG security regulations but also those of France and Europe, then the Embassy will be provided with a prototype to evaluate for compliance with USG requirements. Gueant acknowledged that he himself had not yet seen an exemplar.

5. In the spirit of cooperation, Gueant unexpectedly proposed that the U.S. Embassy direct to MoI some of those French nationals currently in the B1/B2 visa appointment queue so that instead of applying for a U.S. visa, they may apply for an electronic passport once production goes on-line. He stated that this group, as well as others with immediate travel plans, would be given priority in receiving the new e-passport. However, Gueant emphasized that this expedited service would not be publicized to avoid overtaxing the new passport delivery system. All the U.S. officials present at the meeting enthusiastically welcomed the offer from the MoI to help the Embassy facilitate the travel of French nationals and share some of the burden from the current high demand for U.S. visas. Gueant designated a point of contact in his Ministry with whom the Embassy could continue to liaise on this proposal and on going efforts to get the French e-passport production on line.

6. Comment: Gueant delivered a remarkably positive and optimistic message. If the e-passport production timeline Gueant presented to A/S Harty comes to pass, a heavy burden will be lifted off of Embassy Paris, just in time for the

busy summer season when non-immigrant visa demand peaks. Embassy Paris remains cautiously optimistic about this new development and will continue its dialogue with the GoF at all levels until production of the e-passport is implemented. In the meantime, post will continue to implement measures to meet the on-going high demand for non-immigrant visas. End Comment.

Stapleton